

Southwest urged to forgo new coal plants

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The southwestern United States is especially vulnerable to global warming, but the region can help stop climate change by forgoing new coal-fired power plants in favor of conservation measures and renewable energy, according to a new study.

If more than a dozen new coal plants planned in Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, **Utah** and New Mexico come online, they will emit as much heat-trapping carbon dioxide -- 70 million tons -- as 12.5 million cars driving around the region for a year, according to the study's authors. Titled "Climate Alert: Cleaner Energy for the Southwest," the report was issued by Boulder-based Western Resource Advocates and Environmental Defense, a national nonprofit.

With a quickly growing population and increasing demands on the power grid, the Southwest will be challenged to provide for its residents while dealing with air pollution, water shortages and an arid climate in which heat and drought already are concerns, according to the report. But with natural opportunities for wind, solar and geothermal energy, the region also has the potential to become an international test bed for the long-term sustainability of renewable energy.

"Generating electricity is already one of the main sources of global warming pollution," said John Nielsen of Western Resource Advocates, adding that power plants account for about 40 percent of greenhouse-gas emission nationwide. "These proposed new coal plants in the Southwest will just add to this problem."

The report makes seven recommendations as part of a "new energy road map" for the Southwest. They include caps on emissions; energy conservation through appliance efficiency standards and green building codes; addition of renewable energy to utilities' portfolios; requirements that all new coal power plants use advanced pollution controls; and a focus on electric transmission lines in areas rich in renewable resources.

New coal power plants planned in Colorado include the 750-megawatt Comanche 3 station near Pueblo, a 37.5-megawatt plant near Lamar, the 700-megawatt Tri-State facility in southeastern Colorado and an Xcel Energy plant in the eastern part of the state that would use a more efficient system for burning gasified coal to generate about 300 megawatts. If completed, those plants would emit a combined 12.5 million tons of carbon dioxide annually, according to the report.

The government regulates utilities from a "least cost" perspective, meaning power providers are often obliged to go with the cheapest option unless they can make a compelling case for higher prices, Xcel spokesman Tom Henley said. Xcel's "integrated gasification combined cycle" plant would be the first of its kind in the state, but it could cost 10 percent to 30 percent more than a conventional power station, he said.

Comanche 3, slated to open in 2010 alongside two existing generators, will add new technology to make the complex's total emissions lower than from the original two plants as part of a settlement with environmental groups, Henley said.